Finding Grace and Working Through Grief as a Lawyer

By Rachel Schromen

In 2020, much of my life started to unravel, beginning with the death of my father. From the outside, it looked like I was handling the loss as best as could be expected, but under the surface, more was happening.

My father passed away in the fall of 2019, and a few months later after taking a *23 and Me* test, I learned that he had not been my biological father—a revelation which reopened other childhood and life events I had not effectively dealt with. I was just beginning to process this information when the world shut down due to COVID 19, requiring not only personal adjustments but also massive adjustments for my busy law practice. I was coping and surviving—but just barely.

Eventually, I got the help I needed to move forward in a more productive way. I sought the support of a grief therapist, was introduced to somatic therapy, started yoga and meditation practices, and gained tools through Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT). As with all healing, it's a journey, not a destination. I continue to learn new skills, and as my life changes, so does the way I relax, recover, and heal.

As I travel the path of healing from these traumas, however, I sometimes face triggers in my work as an estate planning and elder law attorney. My work can bring up difficult topics that can elicit emotional responses, and even closely resemble my personal experiences. In fact, 15 minutes after I learned that my biological father was not who I had been told he was my entire life, I walked into a new client meeting where the woman I was meeting with shared that she had recently learned, through a commercial DNA test, that she had a sibling she did not know about previously. I was still in shock from receiving my news, so, while I did not have an emotional response, the irony of the timing of meeting with a client with this concern was certainly not lost on me.

Of course, this doesn't mean I need to change careers or stop engaging with clients. I love the work that I do, and my lived experiences lend to my passion for supporting families and individuals facing similar challenges. While these conversations with clients can be personally challenging, I don't want to avoid them. So instead, I prepare myself. That preparation can look different on different days.

One thing I do to prepare myself is to prioritize my own grief work. I have practiced sitting with my own emotions and acknowledging them when they come up. Trying to stifle responses or stuff down my emotions in a meeting can be more uncomfortable and disruptive than gently acknowledging them in the moment. I have also learned to communicate my responses and feelings, when necessary and appropriate, and ask to take a moment when I need to.

I lost my father in 2019 to Alzheimer's, and as an elder law attorney, I frequently work with families caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's. Recently I had a client who was caring for her husband whose Alzheimer's was rapidly progressing. Her husband's behaviors and demeanor presented almost identically to my father's—he even had the same hobbies and type of career prior to his diagnosis.

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When working with this client, I found myself getting teary-eyed one day. Rather than trying to shut down the emotion and power through the meeting, I simply shared with her the similarities that not only reminded me of my own sad journey, but also reminded me of fond memories. This led to a beautiful conversation about our shared experiences, which deepened the trust in our attorney-client relationship.

In addition to working on and tending to my own grief, I also schedule carefully. There are certain days where I don't meet with clients because I know my own grief will feel too heavy. Other days, I schedule virtual meetings or phone calls because I know that meeting in person with clients may be too much. My father passed away on his 70th birthday— October 26, 2019. I make certain this is not a meeting-heavy day.

My experience is not unique and certainly is not specific to the practice of estate planning and elder law. As attorneys, we often support our clients with difficult decisions and in difficult times of life, with many attorneys not only having to navigate personal triggers but also vicarious trauma stemming from the work that they do. In addition to the tools previously discussed, I also provide myself with ample grace and space—the same kind of grace and space I want to extend to my clients and employees, and something I hope more attorneys give themselves permission for as well.

Rachel Schromen is an estate planning and elder law attorney and owner of Schromen Law, LLC. Since starting to practice law in 2013, Rachel has been named one of the Top 3 Best Rated Estate Law firms in St. Paul (2018-2022) and was voted Best Estate Law Firm in Minnesota by readers of the Star Tribune in 2021 and 2022. Apart from her law practice, Rachel is a hospice volunteer as an end-of-life doula.